

# Who Counts? Nuns, Work, and the Census of Canada

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*Although women religious (commonly called nuns) have historically been a large group of mostly professional women, they were regularly excluded from what the Census of Canada defined as the work force. In the censuses from 1871 to 1991, the categories in which nuns were enumerated varied, resulting in impossible fluctuations in their numbers and under-reporting of their contributions to the work force. Nor are the statistics provided by the Roman Catholic Church reliable for estimating the number of nuns working in Canada in any given year. How nuns were reported in the census has had significant implications for the ways in which they have been portrayed or neglected by labour historians.*

*Bien qu'elles aient été à travers l'histoire un vaste groupe de femmes surtout professionnelles, les religieuses (communément appelées sœurs ou bonnes sœurs) étaient régulièrement exclues de ce que le Recensement du Canada définissait comme la population active. Aux recensements de 1871 à 1991, les religieuses n'ont pas toujours été dénombrées dans les mêmes catégories, ce qui s'est traduit par des fluctuations impossibles de leur nombre et par une sous-représentation de leur contribution à la population active. Les statistiques de l'Église catholique ne permettent pas non plus d'estimer de manière fiable le nombre de sœurs travaillant au Canada durant une année donnée. Le mode de dénombrement des sœurs lors du recensement a eu des répercussions importantes sur la façon dont les historiens du mouvement ouvrier les ont dépeintes ou négligées.*

FEMINIST HISTORIANS and economists have made a major contribution to women's history by examining the diversity and underestimation of married and unmarried women's work historically. To date, however, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the work of vowed women, which has been similarly devalued.<sup>1</sup> For example, although

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions to the dearth of research on women religious and work include Nicole Laurin, Danielle Juteau, and Lorraine Duchesne, *À la recherche d'un monde oublié. Les communautés*

women religious (commonly called nuns) were a large group of mostly professional women whose membership in Canada peaked at approximately 66,000 in 1965,<sup>2</sup> they were regularly excluded from what the census defined as the work force. When labour — including nursing, teaching, social work, and domestic work — was performed by women who had taken vows of poverty and were motivated by love of neighbour and obedience to a higher power, census officials often decided it should not be counted in the census. This seemed clear in the 1931 instructions to enumerators, which included the caveat: “religious workers . . . as [they] do not receive money payment for their services” were not to be considered gainfully employed.<sup>3</sup> In fact, nuns usually were remunerated for their work, albeit at a lower rate than their secular counterparts; these payments went into convent coffers rather than directly to individual nuns. The “convent economy” worked much like a family economy.<sup>4</sup> An examination of the intersection of nuns’ gender, work, and religious vows with the political goals of the *Census of Canada* between 1871 and 1991 demonstrates changes in the nature of and perception of nuns’ work over time. Historically, neither the Canadian government nor the Roman Catholic Church offered accurate statistics on nuns.<sup>5</sup> Yet several scholars have, unfortunately, accepted the census figures and repeated these errors in published work, giving another example of what Bettina Bradbury has referred to as “how little thought historians using the census have given to the kinds of work that are not clearly listed.”<sup>6</sup> This study explains the kind of work nuns did, how the census-makers counted nuns, how scholars

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*religieuses de femmes au Québec de 1900 à 1970* (Montreal: Université de Montréal, 1997); Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Québec, 1840–1920* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1987). In addition, several books and articles consider the work of a specific congregation, particularly in teaching, nursing, and social work, including Rosa Bruno-Jofré, *The Missionary Oblate Sisters: Vision and Mission* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005) and Elizabeth Smyth, ed., *Changing Habits* (Ottawa: Novalis Press, 2007). Unfortunately, there is no synthesis of nuns’ work in Canada.

2 Marc A. Lessard and Jean Paul Montminy, *The Census of Religious Sisters in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, 1965), p. 274. By professional, I mean that they have obtained post-secondary education and are usually members of a professional association.

3 Canada, *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. 7 (Ottawa, 1936), p. ix.

4 After Vatican II, many women religious were hired as individuals rather than as part of a congregation serving in an institution and were more likely to receive a wage directly, yet they were still required to give most of it to their congregation. Aline Charles, “Women’s Work in Eclipse: Nuns in Quebec Hospitals, 1940–1980” in Georgina Feldberg, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Alison Li, and Kathryn McPherson, eds., *Women, Health, and Nation: Canada and the United State Since 1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), p. 275.

5 Laurin, Juteau, and Duchesne, *À la recherche d’un monde oublié*, especially chap. 1, 2, and 4.

6 Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), pp. 141–142.

have misunderstood the census figures, and how enumeration practices changed over time.

### Nuns' Work

Nuns can be found in both Christian and Buddhist traditions, but in Canada the vast majority have been Roman Catholic and associated with the schools and hospitals that served the approximately 40 per cent of the population who identified themselves with that denomination between 1871 and 1961.<sup>7</sup> Although active in every province, for most of the twentieth century at least 70 per cent of women religious in Canada have served in Quebec.<sup>8</sup> In 1921, approximately 2.5 per cent of adult women over the age of 20 in Quebec were women religious.<sup>9</sup> In twentieth-century Canada, women had almost 200 congregations from which to choose if they decided to enter a religious congregation. These varied significantly in the standards of living they offered, the kind of work performed, the geographic range of service, and the class and ethnic mixture of members.<sup>10</sup> In 1965, the Women's Section of the Canadian Religious Conference identified seven kinds of service to which congregations of women religious were devoted: contemplatives, missionaries, hospitallers (nurses), educators, educator-hospitallers, social workers, and priests' domestic helpers.<sup>11</sup> Aline Charles has noted the variety of jobs assigned in the 1940s in one particular congregation that focused primarily on nursing: "superintendents, accountants, librarians, technicians, receptionists, chief-cobblers (*maîtresses de la cordonnerie*) laundry helpers, or vegetable

7 Brian Clarke, "English-Speaking Canada from 1854" in Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, eds., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 293–296. See also Michel Theriault, *The Institutes of Consecrated Life in Canada from the Beginning of New France up to the Present: Historical Notes and References* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1980), p. 7, and "Series A164–184: Principal Religious Denominations of the Population, Census Dates, 1871 to 1971," *Historical Statistics of Canada*, Statistics Canada website, [http://www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/af-fdr.cgi?l=eng&loc=A164\\_184-eng.csv](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/af-fdr.cgi?l=eng&loc=A164_184-eng.csv). The term women religious is more inclusive than nun because it applies to women who have joined religious communities and formally taken vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; it includes those who are active in the world — usually called sisters — and those contemplative women who do not leave their convents — usually called nuns. In this article I use "nuns" as commonly used to denote all women religious.

8 Laurin, Juteau, and Duchesne, *À la recherche d'un monde oublié*, Table 5, p. 150.

9 Marta Danylewycz wrote that nuns comprised 2.2 per cent of all adult women over 20 in Quebec in 1921, but she seems to have used figures from Bernard Denault and Benoît Lévesque, which may be a bit low, so I am estimating the number was approximately 2.5 per cent. See Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 17; Bernard Denault and Benoît Lévesque, *Éléments pour une sociologie des communautés religieuses au Québec* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montreal / Université de Sherbrooke, 1975), p. 43.

10 Lessard and Montminy, *The Census of Religious Sisters in Canada*, p. 274. See also Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 105.

11 Lessard and Montminy, *The Census of Religious Sisters in Canada*, p. 275.

aides (*légumières*).”<sup>12</sup> More broadly, Laurin, Juteau, and Duchesne found that, of 42,855 women religious in Quebec in 1961, 59 per cent were engaged in teaching at various levels, 27 per cent were engaged in hospital work or institutionalized social work (including orphanages), and 5.4 per cent supported priests (in rectories, dioceses, and other institutions). Fewer than 1,000 women were engaged in either missionary work or contemplative life.<sup>13</sup>

Most congregations had many convents (also called houses or missions), which might be compared to branch plants of the administrative centre or mother house. Because these smaller convents in both rural and urban areas were often physically connected to the schools and hospitals in which most nuns served until the mid-1960s, the common industrial and post-industrial distinction between working out and working at home was often blurred for nuns. “Convent” usually referred specifically to the nuns’ residence. Depending on the prestige of the congregation — which was determined by the date of its establishment, whether it had a major benefactor, its work, and its clientele (school children whose parents paid significant school fees versus non-paying hospital patients, for example) — a convent could be spacious and ornate, or cramped and run-down.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of its level of prestige, the convent economy mirrored a household or family economy of the industrial or post-industrial period: most women religious were engaged as teachers, nurses, or social workers in Catholic institutions, while other women religious provided necessary domestic work in the convent or connected institutions, which allowed for the reproduction of the labour force as well as the completion of non-traditional labour such as carpentry or whatever else was needed.<sup>15</sup> While nuns are best known for their contributions to education and health care, the value of the work accomplished inside the convent — their own residence — must be noted; the value of such work is comparable to Jeanne Boydston’s description of the importance of nineteenth-century American housewives’ “efforts in organizing, overseeing, and leading an intricate battery of activities aimed at avoiding case expenditures.”<sup>16</sup> This was particularly important before the development of the welfare state in institutions such as orphanages that were chronically underfunded because so few clients were able to pay fees. By necessity, in the convent, as Louise Tilley and Joan Scott write regarding the family economy, there was an “interdependence of family” in which

12 Charles, “Women’s Work in Eclipse,” p. 271.

13 Laurin, Juteau, and Duchesne, *À la recherche d’un monde oublié*, p. 55.

14 Danylewycz notes such comparisons between the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame and the Sisters of Miséricorde (*Taking the Veil*, pp. 77–78).

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–103.

16 Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 91.

some members work outside the household for pay and some work inside without wages.<sup>17</sup>

The comparisons between nuns' and lay women's work were many, even regarding reproductive labour. Not only were those nuns who supported the wage-earning nuns by cooking, sewing, and doing laundry providing reproductive labour, but much of nuns' work historically has been caring for children in orphanages, schools, and hospitals. Thus, while nuns do not reproduce the labour force by actually giving birth, they engage in associated labour. The most significant difference between nuns and birth mothers may be that the convent economy could not anticipate the relief of children ever leaving home to contribute wages themselves because the sources of children in orphanages and schools, in particular, were constantly renewed from the period of colonization until the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the most obvious similarity between the labour performed by vowed women and married women in the late nineteenth century until at least World War II was that it was devalued, in part because women performed it. Boydston notes that, in the last three decades, several feminist historians have argued that women's weak position in the labour force is most likely attributable to "the actions of male workers and husbands, who considered their prerogatives as *men* to be at stake."<sup>19</sup> In the case of the devaluing of nuns' labour, we can look to bishops and other members of church hierarchy who often did not appreciate the value of nuns' contributions to the Catholic social order.

While roles were rarely clear-cut in a convent or traditional family economy, one can divide nuns into three categories for the purposes of demonstrating their productivity and explaining their role in a pseudo-family economy from the mid-nineteenth century until Vatican II: first, rank-and-file nuns who worked in Catholic schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, and social service bureaus and brought wages back to the convent; second, domestic/household nuns who remained in the convent and reproduced the congregation's labour force and staffed its institutions as domestic labourers (in many ways reproducing the "clients," including school children and hospital patients); and third, administrator-nuns who oversaw the management of the whole congregation, including managing capital projects and staffing institutions.

17 Louise Tilley and Joan Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 104.

18 There are examples of youths under nuns' care working, some mentioned in Brian Titley, "Heil Mary: Magdalen Asylums and Moral Regulation in Ireland," *History of Education Review*, vol. 35, no. 2 (July 2006), pp. 1–15. Andr  e L  vesque describes work required of single mothers under nuns' care in "Deviant Anonymous: Single Mothers at the H  pital de la Mis  ricorde in Montreal, 1929–1939," *Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers* (1984), pp. 168–184.

19 Boydston, *Home and Work*, p. xix.

Nuns who provided Catholics with health care, education, and other social welfare services were the majority — probably over three-quarters of all nuns from the founding of religious orders in Canada until Vatican II in the 1960s. Once they had finished their approximately two-year formation or training in religion and additional formal education if necessary,<sup>20</sup> they were comparable in the family economy scenario to both primary breadwinners and adult, single, wage-earning daughters who contributed directly to the economy and brought money into the family, most often as educators and health professionals in the congregational or diocesan hospitals, schools, and other social welfare agencies. Nuns, who far outnumbered priests and brothers, provided the immense work force that allowed for separate systems of Catholic education and health care in many parts of North America from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s. One might say these schools and hospitals were built on the backs of nuns; yet this metaphor is, admittedly, complicated by the nuns' formal dedication of their lives to Christian service.

Nuns primarily engaged in domestic labour not only provided reproductive labour, but also resembled married women or young daughters at home in that they, like these secular women, made a significant financial impact by stretching the wages brought into the family by the outside wage-earners. These nuns used food preservation and agricultural production as a way of extending the family income, a role that secular women have often performed according to Tilley and Scott, Bradbury, and Boydston.<sup>21</sup> Some congregations, such as the Sisters of Congregation of Notre-Dame, had a separate tier of membership for domestic or "lay" sisters who served the domestic needs of the professional "choir" sisters.<sup>22</sup> Having this level of membership acknowledged the high demand on congregations for domestic service in their institutions and convents as well as clergy residences and seminaries.

A third type of women religious were administrator-nuns, who managed the congregation in a variety of ways, from supervising the building of schools and hospitals to meting out discipline to other nuns to filling out paperwork for the Vatican or local diocese. Marta Danylewycz has

20 Some congregations, including the Congregation of Notre-Dame, ran their own provincially accredited normal schools, and some, including the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, operated hospital schools of nursing. Training in such schools could be part of the novitiate programme.

21 Tilley and Scott, *Women, Work, and Family*, p. 129; Bradbury, *Working Families*, p. 153; Boydston, *Home and Work*, pp. 116–117. In Boydston's words, the industrial economy "was still a process that required the saving and conserving, as well as the getting, of resources" (*Home and Work*, pp. 116–117).

22 In 1901, almost 20 per cent of Quebec nuns were lay nuns, but this dropped to 10 per cent in 1930 and continued to drop until that tier was discontinued in accordance with a Vatican II directive. See Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 79; Laurin, Juteau, and Duchesne, *À la recherche d'un monde oublié*, p. 157.

argued not only that such congregational leaders wielded “authority and power unmatched in the secular society of nineteenth century Québec,” but that they could cross significant class boundaries in their “rise to power.”<sup>23</sup> Given that nuns were not merely employed in the institutions in which they worked, but that their congregations often owned the buildings,<sup>24</sup> the responsibility for planning, building, maintaining, and funding these institutions could be enormous, particularly in the case of hospitals, which had to meet national accreditation standards and provide the most up-to-date equipment.

While grouping nuns into three categories is useful in a discussion of labour, the categories were by no means absolute. As did secular women, nuns often performed double days of labour. Some congregations encouraged daily domestic and contemplative work for professional nuns not only to provide the necessary labour but also to symbolize service, humility, and obedience. Beginning in the late 1950s, nuns’ work moved away from congregational commitments to institutions and became more varied, usually based on individual nuns’ talents and interests.<sup>25</sup> Still, aside from those nuns who sought a higher education, who were training in the initial stages of religious formation, or who were too old or too ill to work, all nuns engaged in some work, which Tilley and Scott define as “productive activity for household use or exchange.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, Charles notes that even sick or aging nuns in the 1940s to 1980s “did not get actual rest, only less work to do. They could not take time off, let alone retire. Only death brought an end to their ‘life of toil’.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, from 1871 to the present, the enumeration of nuns in the *Census of Canada* is chaotic; nuns have often been excluded from the labour force in a manner that is even more erratic and under-reported than the way housewives have been treated, and there are impossible fluctuations in the number of “nuns” in the *Census of Canada* from 1871 to 1991.

### Census Classification of Nuns

Acknowledging how women religious were enumerated illustrates Bruce Curtis’s argument that the census is made, not taken.<sup>28</sup> To highlight this

23 Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, p. 106.

24 Charles, “Women’s Work in Eclipse,” p. 265.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 275. Several circumstances led congregations to move away from institutional work, including the federal government’s introduction of the *Diagnostic Services Act* (1958), which paid patient fees, and the deinstitutionalization recommended for children in orphanages. In the late 1960s, the Church’s own recommendation in *Perfectae Caritatis* directed nuns to shift the focus of their work to the poorest in society.

26 Tilley and Scott, *Women, Work, and Family*, p. 3.

27 Charles, “Women’s Work in Eclipse,” p. 268, note 7.

28 Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840–1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 33.

issue, let us consider a particular enumeration scenario in the first federal census. In April 1871, census enumerator John Cummins walked along Barrington Street in Halifax, enumerating District 190 – West Halifax, subdistrict B, Ward 2. Cummins, a 40-year-old commission merchant, had been hired and trained for his temporary position as enumerator by the local census commissioners and earned up to three dollars a day for the short duration of the enumeration.<sup>29</sup> An Irish Catholic who lived only a few blocks away with his wife and two young daughters, Cummins was no doubt familiar with the 156th dwelling in his district, St. Mary's Convent, which was, at the time, the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax. The convent was attached to their day school, also called St. Mary's, on the same property as the Basilica and just down the street from the hospital the congregation operated, the Halifax Infirmary.<sup>30</sup> The portress who promptly answered the door probably asked Mr. Cummins to wait while she went to find the mother superior. Like all "household heads," the mother superior would have received the questions in advance to prepare for the enumerator.<sup>31</sup>

For the nominal census, the first of nine schedules to be completed, Cummins asked Mother Elizabeth for the names of everyone who resided in the convent on that day, along with their sex, age, place of birth, religion, ethnic origin, profession/occupation or trade, marital status, ethnicity, level of education, and specific infirmities. Although it certainly is hard to imagine Mr. Cummins asking the marital status, sex, or religion of the nuns without embarrassment, enumerators were taught not to assume the answers to any questions, but "to record answers to the census questions, which were to be addressed in full to each potential informant."<sup>32</sup>

He recorded 28 residents, 21 of whom he indicated on the nominal census were nuns by including "Sister" as part of their names, five of whom were under 14 years of age and were probably orphans, and two of whom were women aged 20 and 23 who may have been seeking refuge at the convent or could have been domestic servants. Cummins appears to have carefully recorded the 28 residents' ages, countries or

29 The training involved working through the census manual and practising with sample schedules. Cummins's appointment was also approved by the federal Department of Agriculture (Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, pp. 266–267). Cummins was enumerated in a nearby census district, Ward 1 (A1), Division 2, p. 161, as a 40-year-old Irish Catholic merchant who was married and the father of two young children. He is also listed in *McAlpine's Halifax City Directory for 1871–72* as a commission merchant who resided at 128 Lower Water Street.

30 Sister Maura, *The Sisters of Charity, Halifax* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1956), p. 22. Many thanks to Patti Bannister, archivist of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, and Philip L. Hartling, archivist, Nova Scotia Public Archives and Records Management, for their work in helping to sort out these details.

31 Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, p. 268.

32 *Ibid.*



provinces of birth, and ethnic origins as provided by Mother Elizabeth. For columns 15 to 22, which related to marital status, level of education, and illness, Cummins put a dash in every blank to indicate that the questions had been asked but did not apply to any of the 28 residents. For the category "profession, occupation, or trade," Cummins recorded "New Superioress" for Mother Elizabeth, "Nun" for Sister Mary Joseph, the second woman to be recorded, and then ditto marks for the next 26 residents, including the children and two women in their twenties. Notably, he also turned the page 90 degrees to the right and wrote in column 14 of each of the two pages on which the residents were recorded: "'Sisters of Charity' / Teaching of school, visiting of sick and care of orphans."<sup>33</sup> Cummins then continued to the 157th dwelling in his census district. This example was replicated throughout the country, and, although the nominal census form changed from one census to the next, it remains the basic process of enumerating a convent even today.

Bruce Curtis argues that part of what made the 1871 census the first scientific census was the "systematic limitation of the interpretative discretion of enumerators." Cummins was not exceptional in his creative use of the 1871 nominal census schedule to include local matters he deemed worthy of note,<sup>34</sup> such as recording Mother Elizabeth's occupation not merely as "nun" or "teacher," but as "New Superioress." Elected in December 1870, she was only the second leader of the Sisters of Charity, who had come from New York to Halifax in 1849, and Cummins thought it worth saying that she was new. His perpendicular scrawl describing the variety of the work they performed was also clearly outside what the 1871 census manual allowed; yet his agency demonstrates not only the diversity of the nuns' work, but also Cummins's perception of a strong and uniform group identity rather than of individuals with specific training and experience in a particular area. These details were added largely in vain, however, because, in the next step of the process, local census commissioners examined the enumeration records and were required to put a line through "mistakes" or make other corrections as required to non-standardized observations.<sup>35</sup> No census commissioner seems to have tinkered with what Cummins wrote, but his comments would soon be edited out of the aggregate census by a group of compilers in an office of the Department of Agriculture in Ottawa. Unfortunately, records do not survive to show exactly how compilers standardized Cummins's observations about the occupations of the 21 nuns at St. Mary's convent in Halifax in 1871. Were they included in the

33 "Manuscript Census of 1871, Halifax, District 190 – West Halifax, sub district B, Ward 2," pp. 49–50 [online], <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nshalifa/1871.html>.

34 Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, pp. 274, 281.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 268.

2,071 nuns in the 1871 aggregate census, the 13,400 teachers (because they lived in a building attached to a school), or the large number “without occupation” because they were not thought to earn wages?

The title “nun” did not signify an occupation but rather a religious vocation, recognized and formalized by vows. The very existence of the category “nun” as an occupation in 12 of the 14 decennial Canadian censuses since 1871 — all except 1901 and 1911 — illustrates that some census officials identified and understood women religious through their vocation rather than their occupations. In so doing, they ignored the contributions made by women religious to the work force. This parallels Kris Inwood’s and Richard Reid’s assertion that married women were perceived primarily by their social identity. In their words, “Women whose primary social identity was not connected to work were unlikely to report a work-connoting occupation, even if their work was essential to family survival and even if they were earning wages.”<sup>36</sup> Suzanne Morton has similarly found that African Nova Scotian women in Halifax County were regularly listed as having no occupation in the 1871 and 1881 censuses, even though other sources clearly indicated their paid occupations.<sup>37</sup> Bradbury notes a related issue: casual work, particularly that of girls, was unlikely to be listed in late-nineteenth-century censuses.<sup>38</sup> Thus one often sees in the census an empty space under occupation, even when the woman in question operated a boarding house, received wages from weaving or sewing, or strung together several jobs to make a living. Undeclared occupations were most common for married women and least common for widows.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, women religious were often identified by their vocation and relationship to the church, rather than their “work-connoting occupations” such as nurse or teacher. The enumeration of women religious was even more complex because the *Census of Canada* was inconsistent when reporting their occupations, sometimes recording their primary work (such as teacher) and sometimes giving their occupation as nun. Moreover, despite their work remaining relatively constant until the 1960s and largely professional — in that it required formal education and was governed by a professional body — the occupational category “nun” shifted from being counted in the productive category of

36 Kris Inwood and Richard Reid, “Gender and Occupational Identity in a Canadian Census,” *Historical Methods*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2001), p. 58. Inwood and Reid add that, in the late nineteenth century, working women were less likely to identify themselves as having an occupation than were working men and were therefore likely to miss being tallied in the labour force (pp. 65–66).

37 Suzanne Morton, “Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African Nova Scotian Women in Late-19th Century Halifax County” in Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women’s Worlds in the 19th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis, 1994), pp. 192–194.

38 Bradbury, *Working Families*, p. 142.

39 Inwood and Reid, “Gender and Occupational Identity,” p. 58.

employment to being counted in the non-productive one, and then reverted back to a professional/productive category.<sup>40</sup>

### Misunderstanding the Numbers

These inconsistent enumeration practices in the occupational category “nun” have perpetuated and contributed to many misunderstandings of nuns: the total number of women religious in Canada seems grossly under-reported in every census year, and yet it is carried into published research; related occupational categories such as teachers and nurses are skewed; the occupational pluralism of women religious is not acknowledged; and, most starkly, a significant portion of women religious are assumed to have been unproductive and not part of the economy (see Table 1).

Inwood and Reid acknowledge inaccuracies in the census and warn that occupational data should be cross-checked with other sources when possible.<sup>41</sup> Although no accurate figures are available for the total number of nuns residing in Canada annually, several scholars have published estimates that may be used to cross-check census figures. In most cases, these estimates were drawn in part from annual membership statistics on congregations of women religious that the Roman Catholic Church collected and published in an annual fact book, *Canada Ecclésiastique*. However, because few congregations work solely within national borders, summaries based on *Canada Ecclésiastique* figures do not represent the number of nuns working in Canada in any given year. For example, roughly half of the members of the Sisters of Charity (Halifax), those nuns whom Cummins enumerated in 1871, were recent American emigrants, and a large proportion of the congregation’s hospitals and schools were in the United States.<sup>42</sup> So the total number of members this congregation reported annually — figures subsequently published in *Canada Ecclésiastique* — was by no means the same as the number who resided and worked in Canada. Moreover, because *Canada Ecclésiastique* relied on congregation administrators to submit their membership statistics, any figures compiled from *Canada Ecclésiastique* are

40 A profession is difficult to define. As Smyth *et al.* note, it is historically and culturally contingent. See “Introduction” in Elizabeth Smyth, Sandra Acker, Paula Bourne, and Alison Prentice, eds., *Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women’s Professional Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 4. I use professional to describe most nuns’ work because the majority of nuns from the mid-nineteenth century to the late 1950s were engaged in teaching or health care professions and required a formal and continuing education.

41 Inwood and Reid, “Gender and Occupational Identity,” p. 58; *Canada Ecclésiastique* (Montreal, 1887–1975).

42 In 1931, for example, residence before entrance is available for 64 of the 101 entrants to the Sisters of Charity, and 34 of these women were from Massachusetts. See Heidi MacDonald, “Coming of Age in the Convent During the Great Depression” in Smyth, ed., *Changing Habits*, p. 97.

TABLE 1: Number Listed in Occupational Category "Nun," *Census of Canada*, 1871–1991

Year	Number
1871	2,907
1881	5,139
1891*	7,204
1901**	0
1911**	0
1921	11,912
1931	8,260
1941	7,480
1951	10,559
1961	7,237
1971	1,805
1981	5,075
1991	1,145

\* "Members of Religious Orders – Female".

\*\* Category not included.

Source: *Census of Canada*, 1871–1991.

likely to contain a larger margin of error than if an enumerator had presented himself at each motherhouse to take the information, although Catholic record-keeping was quite rigorous.

As part of wider courses of research, two teams of Quebec sociologists have compiled the total number of Quebec nuns by decade between 1901 and 1971, using a combination of questionnaires and information drawn from *Canada Ecclésiastique*. Both teams of sociologists include two sets of figures: the total number of nuns working in Quebec and the total number of nuns belonging to a Quebec congregation but based outside the province.<sup>43</sup> Adding these numbers together, as both teams of sociologists do, however, does not give the total number of nuns in Canada because it does not include any of the congregations based outside Quebec working in the nine other provinces, yet does include nuns who were members of Quebec-based congregations working (usually temporarily) anywhere in the world. A third survey of interest was published in the late 1960s by Marc Lessard and Jean Paul Montminy on behalf of the Women's Section of the Canadian Religious Conference. Based on questionnaires sent to congregations of women religious, the authors write that "98.9 per cent of the women religious in Canada are dealt with,"<sup>44</sup> yet these figures include nuns working outside Canada: "Their

43 By based in Quebec, the authors mean the motherhouse or administrative centre of the congregation was in Quebec, but that the congregation could have convents ("branch plants") and nuns serving anywhere in the world.

44 Lessard and Montminy, *The Census of Religious Sisters of Canada*, p. 274.

members either live in Canada or, if they reside outside Canada, have their superiors living in Canada.”<sup>45</sup>

I have compiled an estimate of the total number of nuns in Canada in selected years using the numbers that each congregation reported for *Canada Ecclésiastique*, excluding the missions outside Canada where possible and excluding postulants, those recent entrants whose turnover rate was high because they were in a discernment phase. The totals I compiled have the same drawbacks as any figures drawn from *Canada Ecclésiastique*; in addition, I could not always be precise when excluding those nuns who worked in missions outside Canada. Nevertheless, all these figures are useful in demonstrating that the *Census of Canada* enumerates only a portion of women religious in the occupational category “nun.”<sup>46</sup> Between 1921 and 1961, my estimates of the total number of nuns in Canada range from approximately two times to approximately seven times the numbers reported in the *Census of Canada* under the occupational category “nun,” an under-reporting of between 44 and 84 per cent (see Table 2).

The main reason that the census under-reported nuns is that compilers, and to a lesser extent census-takers, enumerated some women religious in the occupational category “nun” and others in other occupational categories, most notably that of teacher. For example, the 1931 census lists 8,260 women in the occupational category “nun,” but, according to my estimates compiled from *Canada Ecclésiastique*, the total number of women religious residing in Canada that year was over 30,000. Again using the 1931 census as an example, over 20,000 women religious must have been enumerated into occupational groups other than “nun,” but there is no way to distinguish how many of the 20,462 graduate nurses

45 *Ibid.* Unfortunately, these figures have been republished with the assumption the numbers were actually totals for those nuns residing in Canada. See, for example, Elizabeth Smyth, “Introduction” in Smyth, ed., *Changing Habits*, p. 7; Heidi MacDonald, “Maintaining an Influence: The Sisters of St Martha (Charlottetown) Encounter the 1960s–1980s,” *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2007), p. 89.

46 In 1969, Bernard Denault and Benoît Lévesque sent a questionnaire to 194 male and female religious communities in Quebec, 165 of which responded regarding their foundations and work; 133 of these communities were of women. The questions included the total membership in selected years, which Denault and Lévesque combined with figures given in *Canada Ecclésiastique* to come up with the figures included in Table 2. See Denault and Lévesque, *Éléments pour une sociologie des communautés religieuses au Québec*, p. 40. Nicole Laurin, Danielle Juteau, and Lorraine Duchesne engaged in a similar survey of the evolution of the work on women religious in Quebec between 1901 and 1971. They also used a questionnaire sent to religious congregations of women in Quebec as part of their research and included questions on membership statistics in selected years in the twentieth century; like Denault and Lévesque, they used the responses to the questionnaire in conjunction with figures from *Canada Ecclésiastique* and came up with slightly different estimates, as shown in Table 2. See Laurin, Juteau, and Duchesne, *À la recherche d'un monde oublié*, p. 150.

TABLE 2: Number Listed in Occupational Category “Nun,” *Census of Canada*, Compared to Other Sources in Selected Years

Year	Census	MacDonald	Denault & Lévesque	Laurin <i>et al.</i>	Lessard & Montminy	Difference between census and numbers compiled from <i>Canada Écclésiastique</i> (% excluded from census)	
1901	0	9,759	9,601	10,592	NA	–	
1911	0	NA	14,299	15,210	NA	–	
1921	11,912	21,352	19,339	20,788	NA	–9,440	(44.2%)
1931	8,260	30,868	27,287	27,110	NA	–22,608	(73.2%)
1941	7,480	40,607	35,175	34,138	43,994**	–33,127	(81.6%)
1951	10,559	44,985	40,554	38,271	51,646**	–34,426	(76.5%)
1961	7,237	52,702	46,933	40,496	59,712**	–45,468	(84.0%)
1971	1,805	45,649*	35,050	NA	NA	NA	

\* 1969 figures.

\*\* 1940, 1950, 1960 figures.

Sources: Bernard Denault and Benoît Lévesque, *Éléments pour une sociologie des communautés religieuses au Québec* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal / Université de Sherbrooke, 1975), Table 2, p. 43; Nicole Laurin, Danielle Juteau, and Lorraine Duchesne, *À la recherche d'un monde oublié. Les communautés religieuses de femmes au Québec de 1900 à 1970* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1997), Table 5, p. 150; Marc A. Lessard and Jean Paul Montminy, *The Census of Religious Sisters in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, 1965), Table XLVI, p. 353; *Canada Écclésiastique* (Montreal, 1887–1975), author's calculations (MacDonald).

in Canada or 64,709 female teachers were also nuns.<sup>47</sup> These enumeration practices illustrate the severe limitations of any census and prove that, in Benedict Anderson's words, “the fiction of the census is that everyone is in it and that everyone has one — and only one — extremely clear place. No fractions.”<sup>48</sup>

### Changing Census Practices

The first two national censuses taken after Confederation, in 1871 and 1881, included the category “nun” in their single, long list of occupations. In 1871, for example, “nuns” fell between “notaries” and “nurserymen,”

47 Canada, *Census of Canada, 1931*, “Table 40: Gainfully occupied, 10 years of Age and over, by occupation, age, and sex for Canada and the provinces, 1931,” vol. 7, p. 72.

48 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 166.

and in 1881 between “nail makers” and “optic and math instrument makers.” Figures are not available to compare the 2,907 (1871) and 5,139 (1881) nuns listed in these categories with the total number of nuns in Canada, but, given my estimate of 9,709 for 1901, it is probable that the vast majority of nuns in Canada in 1871 and 1881 were included in those census figures. It appears that census officials saw “nun” as an occupation in itself and did not enumerate a significant number of nuns in other occupations such as teacher or nurse.

In 1891, occupations were grouped by six categories, five that were considered “productive” and a sixth called “non-productive.”<sup>49</sup> While actors, clergymen, musicians, and teachers were placed into the professional category, which was one of the five productive categories, 7,204 “nuns” (now called “female members of religious orders”) were grouped in the non-productive category with paupers/inmates of asylums, pensioners, and Indian chiefs. By replacing “nun” with “female members of religious orders,” census officials were, ironically, saying nothing about these women’s occupations. Not listing their occupations (teacher, nurse, domestic worker) and then labelling them non-productive doubly ignored these women’s contributions to the economy and society. Moreover, the new name for their category put less emphasis on the individual with specific training and experience and more on the social group to which each belonged, much like identifying a woman as married, single, or widowed — all references to her relationship to a man — but ignoring her work-connoting occupation.

The occupational categories of “nun” and “female members of religious congregations” were both excluded from the 1901 census as a way of solidifying the distinction between productive and non-productive Canadians; only the “gainfully employed” were counted, and all those “having no occupation” were placed into a single category, which comprised a majority 66 per cent of the population. The census-makers’ construction of a new dividing line between productive and non-productive Canadians was further entrenched in the 1901 census through an instruction to enumerators regarding housewives: “if [married women] are only carrying on domestic affairs in a household without wages, they are not to be classed as having any occupation.”<sup>50</sup> For census officials, productivity was less about the kind of work one did and more about whether one was remunerated for it. In other words, the wage validated the work. Because nuns were assumed not to receive a wage, they were viewed as dependents

49 The productive categories were: (1) agriculture, fisheries and mining; (2) domestic and personal service; (3) manufacturers and mechanical industries; (4) professional; (5) trade and transportation (Canada, *Census of Canada, 1891*, vol. 2, Table XII, “Occupations of the People,” pp. 140–191).

50 Canada, *Census of Canada, 1901*, vol. 1 (Ottawa, 1905), p. xix.

and grouped with those children, inmates, and unwaged housewives who were dependent on the state, on parents, or on husbands. Ironically, the church was far more dependent on these women — whom I estimate totalled 9,759 in Canada in 1901 — than vice-versa. The shift toward labelling women's unwaged work as unproductive is in keeping with Nancy Folbre's finding that women whose primary work was caring for their families were reclassified from being productive workers in nineteenth-century British and American censuses to being unproductive citizens in early-twentieth-century censuses.<sup>51</sup>

Even though "nun" was not included in the list of standard occupations, and thus there were no identifiable women religious in the 1901 aggregate *Census of Canada*, many enumerators used anything available on the enumeration form to indicate the special status of women religious. In 1901, enumerators contravened the guidelines by giving approximately 4,000 women religious the occupational designation "nun" even though they may have realized that tabulators would subsequently count them as having "no occupation" in the aggregate census.<sup>52</sup> They also filled the "relationship to head of household" column with "nun" for approximately 400 women; listed "Sister" as the given name for more than 2,000 women; gave another several hundred women religious "Sister" as part of their first names (for example, "Sister Claude"); indicated two occupations in the single blank for "occupation" (most commonly "Nun Teacher") in several hundred cases;<sup>53</sup> and further circumvented the inadequacy of the single blank for occupation by listing "Sister" in the blank for first name and "Teacher" in the blank for occupation, thereby recognizing the variety and special circumstances of the work performed by women

51 Nancy Folbre, "The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth Century Economic Thought," *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1991), p. 468.

52 My very broad estimate is based on the Canadian Families Project database sample of 5 per cent of the population from the 1901 Census. In the sample, 233 people list "nun" as their occupation. Oddly, 37 of these were men whom I removed from the number in determining an estimate of the total number of women who list "nun" as their occupation. (Most of the men were religious brothers.) See the Canadian Families Project [online], <http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/cfp/>.

53 For these same women, "sister religious" was given for "relationship to head of household" according to the 1901 Census sample database to distinguish them from "sisters" as siblings. See, for example, in the federal Census of 1871 (Ontario index), in the District of Welland, Sub district of Stamford (J) division 2, 15 women listed with the occupation "Nun Teacher." Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Federal *Census* of 1871 (Ontario Index) [online], [http://data4.collectionscanada.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s2=&s3=&s4=nun+teacher&s5=&s1=&s8=019&Sect4=AND&l=20&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect5=CEN1PEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=CEN1&p=1&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.collectionscanada.ca%2Farchivianet%2F02010803\\_e.html&r=0&f=S](http://data4.collectionscanada.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s2=&s3=&s4=nun+teacher&s5=&s1=&s8=019&Sect4=AND&l=20&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect5=CEN1PEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=CEN1&p=1&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.collectionscanada.ca%2Farchivianet%2F02010803_e.html&r=0&f=S). For 1901, see the Canadian Families Project database sample of the 1901 Census; two women in the sample indicate "Nun-Teacher" as their occupation (Canadian Families Project website, <http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/cfp/>).



religious.<sup>54</sup> These examples from the 1901 census illustrate that John Cummins's determination to paint a more nuanced picture of Halifax nuns than the census manual allowed was shared by many enumerators across the country for the next several decades. It may have seemed incongruous to enumerators that these usually well-educated, professional, working women were not considered part of the work force. Other enumerators, perhaps those less familiar with the Catholic Church, may have accepted popular views on the separation of church and state; if women religious belonged to the church, perhaps they did not need a place in the census. It could have been the women religious themselves who identified themselves as nuns when asked their occupations; not only were they more likely to do so, but "nun" was a good umbrella term for the variety of their work and was more in keeping with the humility expected of them than stating a secular occupation could be.

We can assume that compilers counted the approximately 4,000 women whose occupations were listed as nun in the 1901 manuscript census as "without occupation" for the aggregate tables published for 1901, which placed them in the "non-productive" category. Moreover, those nuns would be lost in tabulation because the 1901 census did not subdivide the non-productive category as had the 1891 census. The elimination of "nun" in the 1901 census manual as a standard occupation may reflect the recognition that virtually all nuns had occupations that fit into standard classifications; yet it is more likely that the same women identified as nuns in earlier censuses were now, as a group, rolled into the catch-all non-productive category. In addition, women religious were spread throughout other occupational categories in the 1901 census, but state officials did not indicate how many women religious were included in the non-productive category or how many were in what officials considered the "gainful occupations" of teacher, nurse, or other occupation.<sup>55</sup> This new enumeration practice made women religious invisible in the 1901 aggregate census, and it corroborates historians' linkage of the 1901 census to the goal of the federal government to showcase Canada's economic development to the world, partly by refining and expanding on the enumeration of selected, traditional occupations.<sup>56</sup> By downplaying non-waged labour and labour that was perceived as volunteer, such as that of women religious, the federal government emphasized the country's industrial productivity.

54 I base these approximate numbers on the sample of the 1901 Census, Canadian Families Project website, <http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/cfp/>.

55 I am assuming that the Census did not usually include women religious who worked as domestics within their orders as "domestics," although I did find one such case in the 1901 Census. See Canadian Families Project 1901 Census Database website, <http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/cfp/>.

56 Peter Baskerville and Eric Sager, "Finding the Work Force in the 1901 Census of Canada," *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 28, no. 56 (November 1995), pp. 529–530.

No changes were made regarding women religious in the 1911 census, but in 1921 state officials came full circle in their enumeration of nuns. Not used as an occupational category since 1881, "nun" was included in the census in the major category of "Service," subcategory "Professional," along with other religious workers: "clergymen, missionaries, Salvation Army, and other." This acknowledgement that "nuns" were both productive and professional signalled the census-designers' greater appreciation of the work undertaken by women religious. The 1891 census, the first that separated occupations into categories, listed women religious clearly apart from the obviously comparable category of "clergymen"; yet, in the 1921 census, the occupations "nuns" and "clergymen" were on an equal plane, and by nature of alphabetical listing only two subcategories away from lawyers, judges, and clerks. Perhaps the census officials' willingness to accept that the majority of nuns were, like clergymen, educated professionals was tied to the overall rise of women's status in this era, including increasing professionalization in some traditionally female occupations (especially social work), federal enfranchisement in 1918, and broad acknowledgement of women's contributions to the First World War. Moreover, 1921 was the twentieth-century watermark for the most nuns (approximately 56 per cent) counted in the occupational category "nun." This greater appreciation for the productivity of women religious continued in the 1931 census, in which "nuns" were situated in the extended category of "Professional Service" between musicians and music teachers and nurses-graduate. Only approximately 27 per cent of women religious were in the "nun" occupational category in 1931, suggesting that the majority were being counted in the occupation in which they were professionally recognized.<sup>57</sup>

The category of nun changed again in 1941. While still grouped under "Service-Professional," the 7,480 "nuns" — approximately 18 per cent of all nuns in Canada — were included under "Active Service." This new category distinguished between active and inactive service for the 1,432 "brothers" (vowed male members of religious congregations), but all "nuns" were described as being in active service. The Second World War seems to have led state officials to emphasize the distinction between active and inactive men and may have led to a greater appreciation of volunteer work. At the same time, census-designers could still indicate more passively the lack of productivity of women religious by continuing to avoid assigning them any occupation other than nun and then rolling them into the large non-productive category. By including women

57 According to Mary Kinnear, "By World War I, women were securely employed in nursing and teaching, and had been permitted access to the learned professions of medicine, law, and scholarship." Mary Kinnear, *In Subordination: Professional Women, 1870–1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 6. Placing "nuns" in the same census subdivision as teachers and nurses acknowledged their overlap with these two occupations.

religious in active service, census-makers were exaggerating the breadth of the population engaged in the war effort. This emphasis is also suggested by the high number of nuns, almost 82 per cent of the total number in Canada at the time, being enumerated in a category other than nun, thereby beginning to reverse the tradition of recognizing women (in this case, nuns) by their social position rather than their work.

The 1951 and 1961 censuses continued to list 10,559 and 7,237 “nuns,” or 23 and 16 per cent of all women religious, respectively, among professionals in a list of 35 categories from accountants to veterinarians. That nuns were considered “professionals” for three successive decades suggests their professionalism had been accepted, and, in fact, this trend continued to the end of the century. In the next three censuses, the category “nun” was placed within a newly created professional group called “Social Sciences and Related Disciplines” that included teachers and social workers. The enumeration itself, however, continued to be erratic: the census reported 1,805 “nuns” in 1971, 5,075 “nuns” in 1981, and 1,710 “nuns” in 1991. These totals do not relate to the true membership of Canadian congregations, which, according to a church source, was 59,712 in 1960 and 28,639 in 2000, although these numbers are inflated by 10 to 20 per cent in my estimation because they include Canadian nuns working outside Canada.<sup>58</sup> The census may have created this new category in response to the proliferation of new jobs caused by the increasing bureaucratization and government funding of health care and other social services, areas in which women religious had long histories of service.<sup>59</sup> Nuns transferred to some of these jobs after many of their own schools, hospitals, and orphanages closed for three main reasons beginning in the late 1950s: federal and provincial governments took more responsibility for health care, Vatican II directed nuns to work more directly with the poor rather than in institutions, and membership fell so dramatically in women’s religious orders that there were too few nuns to provide the necessary skilled labour. For example, before the late 1950s, the vast majority of Catholic hospitals were administered and staffed by nuns, but so many closed after the late 1950s that the number of Catholic hospital beds decreased in Canada by more than 50 per cent between 1970 and 1975, from 60,954 to 26,356 beds.<sup>60</sup>

Enumerating women religious is largely an issue of reporting and understanding occupational pluralism. In her work on women religious and the

58 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Canadian Religious Conference, *Universal Call to Holiness and Religious Vocations, Donum Dei II* (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, 1966).

59 In particular, the introduction of the *Diagnostic Services Act* in 1958 and Medicare in 1966 made hospitals much more affordable for patients, and thus the subsidized labour of women religious was less necessary.

60 Gérard Pelletier and André Cellard, *Faithful to a Mission: Fifty Years with the Catholic Health Association of Canada* (Perth, ON: BAC Communications, 1990), pp. 170, 199.

professions, Elizabeth Smyth explains the uniqueness of women religious having “dual professional lives . . . through their lives in religion and as members of the professions through their work in the secular world.”<sup>61</sup> Referring to a 1965 survey that reported that almost 90 per cent of the 65,248 listed women religious in Canada were engaged in the field of health care or education, Smyth explains that these women religious had two clear sets of responsibilities. Sister-teachers or sister-nurses, as well as the many other sisters with professions, were trained and educated in specific professions, in addition to being trained in religious life. In their first profession, religious life, entrants were introduced to the ways of the congregation through a formal process that usually lasted from six months to two years.<sup>62</sup> Those who continued after this stage, having gained the approval of the congregational leaders, either began or continued their work in another profession, often as a nurse or teacher, which required post-secondary training, including theory and an apprenticeship.<sup>63</sup> Women religious were required to meet “continuing education” requirements in each of their dual professions. In Smyth’s words, “Being a vowed religious and teacher was exhausting and demanding work. Days were very full: early rising for morning mass, journeys to their places of work, meals taken in community, evening prayer, community recreation. Life was highly regulated with little time for personal reflection. Summer ‘vacation’ often meant study: many sisters acquired additional teaching qualifications or their university degrees through part-time study.”<sup>64</sup>

Several other scholars have expressed frustration over how the census hides the occupational pluralism on which so many Canadians were dependent historically and, to a lesser extent, even today.<sup>65</sup> In a study of occupational pluralism in a Confederation-era Nova Scotia community, Larry McCann found that “a number of people who declared their primary census occupation as farmers also appear . . . as seasonal shipyard workers. Conversely, these same linkages indicate that many . . . census-declared shipbuilders not only worked in the woods in winter and did casual labour on Weymouth’s docks during slack shipbuilding periods,

61 Elizabeth Smyth, “Professionalism among the Professed,” in Smyth *et al.*, eds., *Challenging Professions*, p. 236.

62 Danylewycz compared this period in the novitiate to an engagement, during which the woman was free to leave the convent; whether she stayed or not, she learned important skills that could be useful in the domestic sphere or the wider economy (*Taking the Veil*, p. 106).

63 Smyth, “Professionalism among the Professed,” p. 240.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

65 In the words of historical geographer Larry McCann, “Canadian censuses . . . have never required enumerators to record the multiple occupations of individuals, giving the clear impression that this strategy of work and apparently common feature of family life is not important.” See Larry McCann, “Seasons of Labor: Family, Work, and Land in a Nineteenth-Century Nova Scotia Shipbuilding Community,” *The History of the Family: An International Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1999), p. 488.

but also maintained the ownership and security of improved farmland and woodlots.”<sup>66</sup>

Like McCann’s nineteenth-century rural subjects, most, if not all, women religious engaged in a kind of occupational pluralism and adaptive family economy, in which their congregations, and sometimes the Church, represented the family. Whether individual women religious were census-declared “nuns,” teachers, nurses, or social workers, many of them engaged in several other jobs, some of which were remunerated financially, while others were not. Moreover, while women religious regularly performed more than one role in any given day, week, or month, other work assignments were, in fact, determined by season in a similar way as for McCann’s subjects. For the past three centuries, the primary occupation of the majority of women religious was teacher. Schoolteachers from September to June, whether paid by government coffers or student fees, these same women religious may have given after-school private piano or singing lessons to paying students, taught Sunday school, or provided organ music at Sunday services during the same months. In summer, they usually taught summer Catechism courses in nearby or even far-away parishes, and they were also more likely to renovate the schools in which they taught than were secular teachers, particularly because some bishops saw women religious as a reserve army of labour that might be asked to take on a wide variety of projects.<sup>67</sup> Particularly before Vatican II, even women religious who taught in elite schools could be expected to do a significant amount of domestic service in their convents on the weekends and in summer. Just as McCann explains that nineteenth-century Nova Scotia men often combined wage-earning opportunities such as “farmer-fisherman, farmer-lumberman, farmer-saw miller, farmer-miner, lumberman-farmer, shipyard worker-farmer, miner-farmer, steelworker-farmer,”<sup>68</sup> so might women religious blend nun-teacher-organist, nun-nurse-congregation administrator, or nun-farmer-domestic-seamstress. Thus the listing of occupations of women religious is just as skewed as the categories of farmer, logger, or fisherman, which are most associated with occupational pluralism due to their seasonal nature.

### Conclusion

Not knowing how to categorize women religious is symbolic; it reflects how secular society and the church have understood women religious and

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>67</sup> Mary Olga McKenna, “Paradigm Shifts in a Women’s Religious Institute: The Sisters of Charity, Halifax, 1950–1979,” *Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Historical Studies*, vol. 61 (1995), p. 140; Heidi MacDonald, “The Social Origins and Congregational Identity of the Founding Sisters of St. Martha, Charlottetown, PEI, 1915–1925,” *Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Historical Studies*, vol. 70 (2004), p. 45.

<sup>68</sup> McCann, “Seasons of Labor,” p. 587.

women's work generally. According to the designers of Canada's first decennial census, the work force was meant to include anyone stating an occupation,<sup>69</sup> which should have included virtually all women religious. With increasing industrialization and urbanization, census officials soon accepted the growing myth of a one-dimensional, cash-based economy by further defining occupation as the position in which the enumerated was "gainfully employed," which the 1901 census identified as "those 'paid salary or wages or other money allowances'."<sup>70</sup> It was at this stage that many women religious — and women in general — were excluded.

Jeanne Boydston argues firmly against the tradition of a wage defining what one considers work, writing, "that a thing can also, formally speaking, have a value without having a price; or to put it another way, a labour form can also have a value without having a wage."<sup>71</sup> Boydston is writing about nineteenth-century housework, but the devaluing of nuns' labour, reflected most starkly in censuses between 1891 and 1941, is a similar misunderstanding of nuns' participation in both the work force and the convent economy.

Many historians continue to think of women religious as outside the economy.<sup>72</sup> Peter Baskerville and Eric Sager, for example, disregard the importance of counting the occupations of women religious in their analysis of the sample they drew from the enumeration of 41,185 people in seven Canadian cities in 1891. They note that, of the 772 people in their sample who reported no information on work duration or employment staff, "close to half were students over 18 years of age, ministers, nuns or hospital patients," from which I infer that the authors did not consider "nuns" part of the work force, or at least not a large enough part to skew occupational statistics.<sup>73</sup> A similar oversight occurs in Mary Kinnear's book on women and the professions in Manitoba, which depends on census data to outline the number of women in the professions of university teachers, medical doctors, lawyers, nurses, and teachers between 1870 and 1970. Although women religious were active in all these professions except for law, Kinnear includes no significant discussion of how including or

69 Baskerville and Sager, "Finding the Work Force," p. 523.

70 Peter Baskerville, "Displaying the Working Class: The 1901 Census of Canada," *Historical Methods*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2000), p. 229.

71 Boydston, *Home and Work*, p. xviii.

72 The same criticism has been directed toward economists. In 1986, Nancy Folbre complained, "Economists often . . . consider questions concerning the household somewhat non-economic. Yet the answers to such questions are relevant not only to theories of household, but also to a larger understanding of the economy as a whole." See Nancy Folbre, "Hearts and Spades: Paradigms of Household Economics," *World Development*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1986), p. 245. See also Margaret Anderson Conk, "Occupational Classification in the United States Census: 1870–1940," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1978).

73 Baskerville and Sager, "Finding the Work Force," p. 533.

excluding women religious would have skewed these totals.<sup>74</sup> In fact, Danylewycz argues that the substantial rise in entrants to religious congregations in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century was partly because of the opportunity for non-traditional careers and leadership positions in many of the professional groups Kinnear considers.<sup>75</sup>

While the census is only one of many contributors to the perception of women religious and the understanding of work, I would argue that how nuns were enumerated in the census has had significant implications for the ways in which many labour historians continue to portray or avoid them, despite our knowledge that the approximately 40 per cent of our population who identified themselves as Roman Catholic were extremely dependent on the labour of tens of thousands of women religious from the period of colonization until recently.<sup>76</sup> As historians Carol Coburn and Martha Smith write, “Historically seen as docile handmaidens and submissive subordinates in the expansion of the growth of the Catholic Church, nuns have only recently become subjects of serious scholarship.”<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Kinnear, *In Subordination*.

<sup>75</sup> Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, pp. 97–103.

<sup>76</sup> Clarke, “English-Speaking Canada from 1854,” pp. 293–296. For a comparative discussion of the contributions of women religious to American parochial schools, see Mary J. Oates, *The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 142–164.

<sup>77</sup> Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Culture and American Life, 1836–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 3.